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The Big Spill

Covering the Exxon Valdez Alaskan Oil Spill

How have the media covered the Alaskan oil spill from the Exxon Valdez tanker? We monitored print and broadcast coverage of the accident and the first two weeks of cleanup efforts, from March 24 through April 7. We analyzed the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts, along with four major newspapers -- the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, and *Los Angeles Times*. The coverage totalled 88 television stories lasting 2 hours 39 minutes, and 121 newspaper articles totalling 2,620 column inches. In addition, we monitored all jokes about the oil spill appearing on NBC's "Tonight Show" and "Late Night."

Major Findings

- **Disaster Watch** - Hiroshima and Three Mile Island were among the top five comparisons to past disasters. *Page 2*

- **Blaming Exxon** - Fewer than one source in five blamed Exxon for the accident. But 71% of sources criticized the company's clean-up efforts, and only 19% praised them. *Page 2*

- **From Bad to Worse** - Opinion on Exxon ran over 2 to 1 negative on TV. But it reached 6 to 1 negative in the newspapers. *Page 3*

- **Pictures of Despair** - TV broadcast nearly 100 different pictures of oil-coated animals, over six per night. *Page 4*

- **The Joke's on Exxon** - The oil spill was the leading source of topical humor on the "Tonight Show" and "Late Night with David Letterman." It inspired over 5 jokes per night, most aimed at Exxon.

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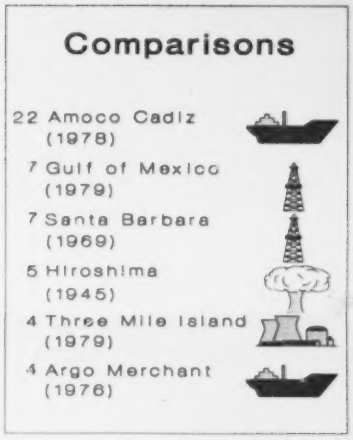
Media Spillover

We monitored major newspaper and television network coverage of the Valdez, Alaska oil spill from March 24 through April 7. During those first two weeks after the tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground, ABC, CBS, and NBC aired 88 stories on their evening news shows, for a collective 2 hours, 39 minutes of coverage. Meanwhile, the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times* each ran between 700 and 800 column inches on the story and the *Wall Street Journal* added nearly 350 inches. These four influential newspapers together printed 121 stories on the spill and its aftermath, totalling 2,620 column inches. On average, that amount of coverage would fill over 37 pages of newspaper text.

Compared to What?

One way the media conveyed the circumstances, magnitude, and impact of the accident was through comparison to past oil spills and other man-made disasters. By far the most frequent comparison raised was the 1978 Amoco Cadiz tanker spill, with over three times as many mentions as any other (22). Next in line were two accidents that took place on off-shore oil rigs (7 mentions apiece).



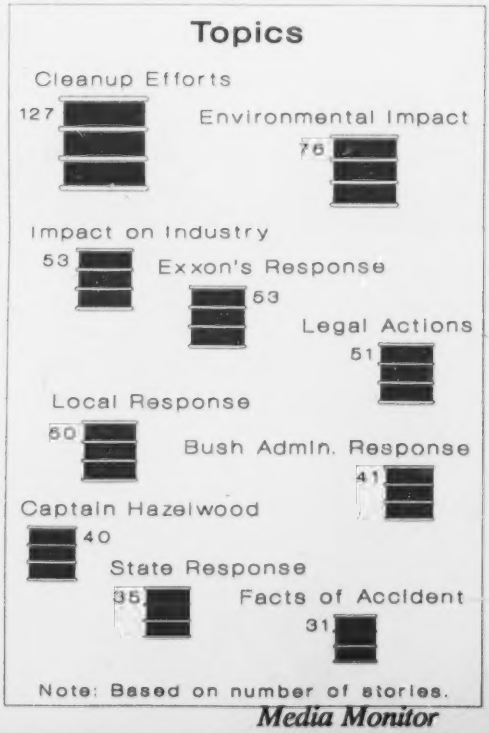
But rounding out the top five were two events with no immediate connection to oil spills -- the bombing of Hiroshima (5 mentions) and the 1979 nuclear accident at Three Mile Island (4 comments). The Hiroshima comparison reflected widespread press attention to Judge Kenneth Rohl's charge, upon setting bail for tanker captain Joseph Hazelwood, that the destruction equaled that of the 1945 nuclear blast. Among the Three Mile Island comparisons was oil industry critic Ed Rothschild's statement in the *Washington Post* that, "In the same way that Three Mile Island dealt a blow to the nuclear industry in its efforts to expand nuclear power in the United States, I think it's the same way here."

Overall there were relatively few comparisons to industrial accidents or man-made disasters with no connections to the oil industry. For example, the 1984 Union Carbide plant explosion in Bhopal, India was used as a point of comparison only twice.

Oil and Water

The drama in this disaster story came not from the accident but its aftermath. The cleanup attracted nearly ten times as many stories as the circumstances of the spill (127 vs. 31). The major interpretative focus was the threat posed to the environment (76 stories), followed by the likely impact on the oil industry (53 stories). The Bush administration kept a low profile, generating only 41 stories concerning its response to the oil spill, fewer than the 50 stories devoted to the local community's response.

In terms of the spill's environmental impact, the plight of sea otters elicited by far the most attention of any single creature (43 stories). Media attention was about evenly divided among the dangers to mammals (65 stories) and birds (58 stories), followed by threats to fish (37), and the ocean or bay in general (21).

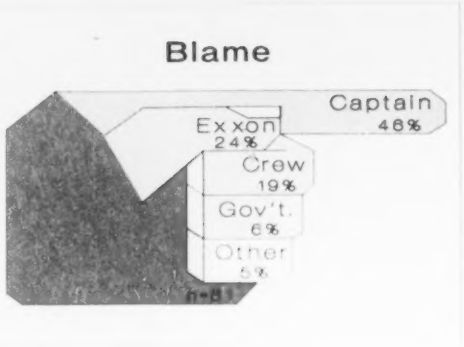


Casting Stones

Who was to blame for the accident? The finger was pointed nearly half the time (45%) at the ship's captain, Joseph Hazelwood. Corporate guilt finished a distant second, as 24% of sources argued that the fault lay with Exxon's policies or

corporate behavior. An additional 18% faulted the tanker's crew, and 6% took issue with government's role in failing to prevent the accident.

The various outlets differed widely in their willingness to cast stones. The most frequent source of criticism was the *Washington Post*. The *Post* published 26 accusations of fault or negligence, more than the three television networks combined (19), or both the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* (11 apiece). The *Wall Street Journal* was the second most judgmental outlet, with 16 accusations. At the networks, ABC took the lead in finding fault, with 12 accusations, compared to only 4 on CBS and 3 on NBC.

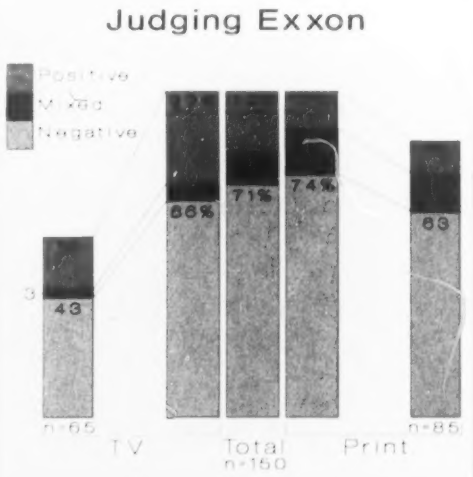


A man-made destruction . . . that probably has not been equaled since Hiroshima.

-Judge Kenneth Rohl
NBC, 4/5

Exxon's Black Eye

We coded 150 statements about how well Exxon reacted (including judgments of Alyeska Pipeline). Assessments of the company's role were usually critical, by 71% negative to 19% positive, with the remaining 10% mixed. Sample positive: "(The cleanup) is going at full speed. It is very effective so far as the number of people and resources involved." -- Transportation Secretary Samuel Skinner, NBC, 3/30. Sample negative: "Exxon seemed to respond to the oil spill . . . in slow motion, raising questions about whether all the (corporate) downsizing had weakened the company -- not only in terms of a decimated oil spill control team, but of overall management control." -- Claudia Deutsch, *New York Times* reporter, 4/2.



Exxon fared significantly better on television than in print. Judgments of the oil company were just over 2 to 1 negative (66% to 29%) on the network news, compared to an overwhelming 6 to 1 margin (74% to 12%) in newspaper articles. The difference reflected Exxon's relative success in getting its spokesmen on the airwaves. Over two thirds of the company's positive assessments on television (13 of 19) came from its own officials. The four newspapers together printed only three defenses of the company's conduct from Exxon spokesmen. Exxon fared best on NBC, with 40% positive assessments. It fared worst in the pages of the *New York Times*, which printed 6% positive, 82% negative, and 12% mixed judgments. But the *Wall Street Journal*, the nation's premier business newspaper, was not much kinder. There Exxon received only 13% positive judgments, compared to 78% negative and 9% mixed.

Much of the criticism came from Alaska's Governor Cowper (10 negative judgments) and Department of Environmental Conservation Chief Dennis Kelso (9). Aside from state officials, angry local fishermen were the company's most frequently quoted detractors. Reporters themselves accounted for 7 unattributed criticisms and no positive assessments.

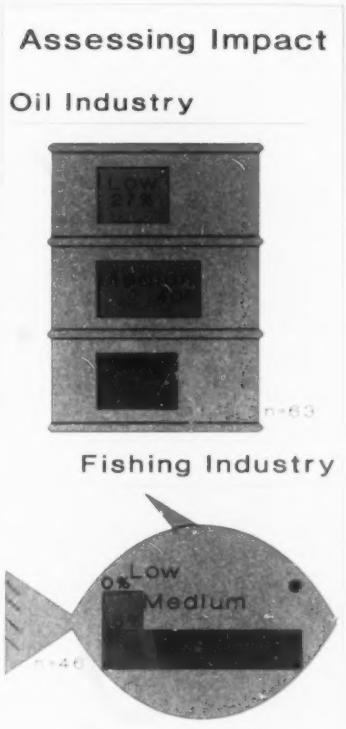
While Exxon was taking a beating in the media, the Bush administration's handling of the accident received relatively little attention. Press notices were mainly negative, by a 3 to 2 margin, but that figure is based on only 15 assessments. So polls showing public dissatisfaction of Bush's handling of the environment probably reflected the public's tendency to blame those in charge when things go wrong, rather than criticism in the media.

Damage Patrol

Although most media accounts were critical of Exxon's response, there was much less agreement about the long-term financial impact of the oil spill on Exxon and the rest of the oil

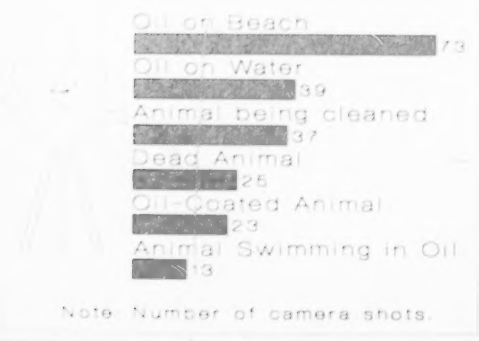
industry. The 63 sources were sharply divided: 33% argued that the accident will produce major new constraints on future exploration, will cause extensive damage to Exxon's financial situation, etc; 40% foresaw moderate but not seriously adverse effects; and 27% forecast negligible damage at most. There was no disagreement about the impact on Exxon's public image, though; all seven sources who addressed this question saw future image problems for the company.

There was also widespread agreement that the impact on the area's fishing industry would be devastating. Not a single source (among 46) downplayed the impact as negligible, and only 15% saw the damage as moderate. The remaining 85% portrayed the cost to the fishing industry as severe or extensive, despite any aid or compensation that might be forthcoming.



Images of Disaster

The spill's environmental impact was portrayed most clearly by television's pictures. In the first 15 days of coverage, viewers of the network evening newscasts were shown 98 pictures of oil-covered animals, including 25 shots of dead animals, 13 of live animals swimming in oil, 37 of oil-covered animals being cleaned, and another 23 of oil-coated animals in various conditions. An additional 39 shots showed oil washing up on beaches and 73 focused on oil slicks on the open water.



Now you can get fish sticks in leaded and unleaded.

- Jay Leno
3/29

(The news) tonight showed baby seals clubbing Exxon officials.

-Jay Leno
4/10

Black Humor

Late-night television provided a darkly humorous counterpoint to the gloomy picture portrayed on the newscasts. We monitored opening monologues on NBC's "Tonight Show" and "Late Night" by Johnny Carson, Jay Leno, and David Letterman, respectively. The oil spill (and especially Exxon's failings) provided by far the most jokes (53) of any public issue during this period (3/24 - 4/7), easily outstripping the numbers devoted to the next most frequently joked-about topics -- crime and drugs (19), religious fundamentalists (10), and the USSR (8, including Gorbachev's trip to Cuba).

According to Carson (4/5), Exxon was "pretty cavalier about the whole thing. Their idea of a clean-up crew was to send Nancy Walker up there with a roll of *Bounty* towels." Carson also suggested (4/6) a new slogan for Exxon: "We're not as bad as Union Carbide." Leno unleashed a string of Exxon jokes on 4/3: "Put a tiger in your tank? Why don't they try putting a skipper in the tanker? . . . They're thinking of changing their name to Accidental Petroleum. . . . They can't even keep their restrooms clean. How are they going to clean up an entire coast?" Leno also claimed a TV show is coming out "about a group of Alaskan yuppies. It's called 10w thirtysomething." And David Letterman (3/29) contributed his own list of the "top ten new Exxon slogans." Among them: "Ecosystem, schmecosystem!"; "Exxon transport: the Eastern airlines of the sea"; "If it weren't for us, American seagulls would be covered with foreign oil!"; and "Anybody got a tissue?"